

THE HIDDEN POWER OF VOICE MAIL

By Chris Horne, Project Manager- Pinnacle Bay Resource Group, Inc.

In my many years in the telecom industry, I have seen dramatic technology changes. I believe one the most significant was the introduction of voice mail. Sadly, in many departments, this powerful technology is not being used to its fullest potential. Most voice mail was installed many years ago. While employees were given one-time, basic training on features and functions, and perhaps received a user guide, no recurring or follow up training has been provided.

In the years since then, no one has instructed the staff on how to properly and effectively use the real power of voice mail—the lesser-known features, such as reply, copy, playback controls and statewide messaging. New employees are required to figure out how to use the phone and voice mail features on their own, through trial and error (mostly error!), or at best, through a 5-minute “training” session by a co-worker who doesn’t really understand the system either. A department’s voice mail policy and proper etiquette techniques may never be discussed at all.

Eventually, no one on staff knows or understands the many time-saving features and capabilities of the voice mail system. Instead, this powerful business tool becomes a source of aggravation to employees and the public alike. With minimal effort and investment that aggravation can be quickly transformed into more productive employees and happier constituents.

For starters, if your department installed voice mail more than a few years ago, conduct a thorough training session for all staff. Include training on the lesser-known or advanced features and be sure to include recommended greetings and any department policy.

Annually thereafter, conduct refresher classes for all employees on voice mail, phones and any other technology not being used to its fullest extent.

If you have a large group of users, this can be accomplished by calling the **Voice Mail Training line at 1-877-626-9861, option 3 and then, 4.**

When new employees come on board, consider providing individual training as part of their orientation program. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as using training videos provided by Pacific Bell’s trainers, sending new users to the regularly scheduled “centralized training” sessions held bi-monthly in downtown Sacramento, or using your own properly trained personnel.

Three major benefits of voice mail training or re-training are:

1. Increased productivity of your employees.
2. Re-enforcement of the department’s voice mail etiquette policy.
3. The opportunity to better serve your callers.

Giving each voice mail user an understanding of how the features work, and how those features can be applied in their business, leads to improved productivity and increased morale. Happier, well-trained employees help improve customer satisfaction.

Some of the more productive features of voice mail that should be addressed during a training session are:

How to “rewind” a message.

Employees will often replay all or part of a message several times to attain all the information it contains. By using the “rewind” or “fast forward” feature, your employees will ease their frustration by hearing only what they need. The “pause” allows time to take notes.

How to “reply” and “copy” a message.

Reply and Copy features enable users to reply to messages from co-workers without the need to call them on the phone. The reply can go to more than one person. Forwarding messages to additional people enables the user to be more productive and reduce the likelihood of errors from misinterpretation of messages. Many people think only e-mail offers these features, but in reality voice mail offered this convenience before e-mail was the ubiquitous business tool it now is.

How to “Tag” a message.

“Tagging” a message is a feature only a few know about. Those that do, may only use the “urgent” option. However, there are other tags that can be very useful. These include “future delivery”, used sometimes as a tool to remind yourself of important dates or meetings, “receipt notification”, where you are notified when a message that you sent was opened, and “private delivery”, which denies the recipient the ability to forward the message to other voice mail users.

So far, we’ve focused on the features of voice mail. Now, let’s talk about user “programming” issues. One training tool is something referred to as “the navigation map”. This is a chart showing which buttons to push to access all the features of the system. It is intended to be a quick reference guide for employees.

I like to make a joke in my training classes by referring to this chart as a “litany of convolution”. An experienced trainer will point out the items on the navigation map that the user needs to follow when re-programming an existing mailbox. Other items to be highlighted include changing the default password to a secure one, scripting and recording greetings and setting up and use of group distribution lists. A separate instruction sheet shows the process for setting up a new mailbox.

If the department does not have a policy regarding voice mail etiquette, consider getting one. Use of professional greetings that are consistent throughout the organization is a good place to start. Giving examples of acceptable greetings in the training session is advisable.

Some departments require greetings to be updated daily and include alternate numbers, such as cell phones or pagers where the employee can be reached if a matter is urgent. Others require alternate greetings be used when employees are out of the office or on vacation. Callers like voice mail when they get a timely callback and hate it when they don’t. Many departments mandate that calls must be returned within a certain timeframe.

Above all, don't hide behind voice mail; the caller's first choice is to speak with someone directly. So policy might say, "If you're available, answer your phone when it rings."

The proper and effective use of voice mail reaps benefits in increased productivity and employee satisfaction, but also leads to improved relationships with co-workers and the calling public. With knowledge comes power, so get ready to unleash the power of voice mail, and see immediate improvements in employee morale and customer satisfaction.

If you need additional information regarding your voice mail, contact your local [Pacific Bell Account Representative](#).

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